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The Impact of a Teacher Education Course Taught in a University Laboratory School Setting

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Abstract

The study took place in a laboratory school located in a Midwestern community with a population of about 100,000. The laboratory school was located on the campus of a comprehensive 4-year university. A university faculty member who was school-based taught a teacher education class within the laboratory school building. The impact of the course was examined through surveys administered to the laboratory school faculty who served as guest speakers, the university students enrolled in the course, and the laboratory school children who were involved in student teacher lessons. Data were analyzed using qualitative methodology. Results and implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords

Laboratory School; Professional Development School; Preservice Teacher Education; Elementary Education; Clinical Teaching Experiences; Student Teacher Field Experiences; Elementary Curriculum; Student Teaching; Teaching Observation; Teacher Inservice; Qualitative Research; Survey Design; Qualitative Data Analysis; Student Teacher Placements

Introduction

Since the 1980s, educational reform has focused on providing "more and better clinical experiences in actual school settings" (Miller & Vaughn, 2000, p. 9) for the education of teachers. Laboratory schools, established in the United States in the 1830s, have traditionally been utilized for this purpose. However, due to operational and philosophical dilemmas, many laboratory schools have struggled to survive, and today, fewer than 100 are in operation (Bonar, 1992; Hausfather, 2000).

As the number of laboratory schools continued to decline, the number of students enrolling in teacher education programs increased. Colleges and universities began to look to the public schools for student teacher placements (Buck & Miller, 1991). Hence, the major feature of the school reform movement in the 1990s was the creation of professional development schools (The Holmes Group, 1990; Winitzky, Stoddart, & O'Keefe, 1992).

How do the two compare? Although they can vary widely, many laboratory schools have at their core the governance of the college or university and exist to serve the needs of the students in teacher education programs. The professional development schools also vary widely; however, they are usually governed by a local school district and exist primarily to serve the community and its children. Aside from the governance differences between the two, they are similar in their ability and potential to provide the eight traditionally accepted purposes of laboratory schools that were defined in the 1990s (Buck, et al., 1991):

1. Providing clinical teaching experiences
2. Developing curriculum

3. Providing sites for observation
4. Demonstrating instructional techniques
5. Conducting research
6. Conducting staff development activities
7. Experimenting with innovative educational ideas
8. Providing a site for student teaching

In order for laboratory schools to survive, they must continue to develop their role as a place to test new ideas and methods and to challenge conceptions of what is possible in schools (Miller & National Association of Laboratory schools, 1997a; 1997b; Tanner, 1997). Laboratory schools can also further establish their role as a site for preservice teacher education courses. This article explores that developing role by describing the impact of a teacher education course taught within a laboratory school with a university instructor who was school-based.

Method

Setting and Background

The setting for the study was a university laboratory school situated in a Midwestern community with a population of about 100,000. The laboratory school housed a child development center, preschool, and students K-12, so children could possibly be in attendance at the school from birth through 12th grade. At the time the study took place, there were 387 students in grades preK-12, with an additional 53 students in the child development center. The laboratory school enrollment included students who were African American (18%), Asian American (6%), Hispanic American (4%), and White, non-Hispanic (72%). The population of students included those who received free and reduced-cost lunches (9%), and students with special needs (15%).

The laboratory school was adjacent to a 4-year, comprehensive university that, at the time of the study, had a student population of about 13,000. Of these students, approximately 2,000 were declared education majors. The majority of education courses were taught on campus; however, a few were also taught at the laboratory school. An issue arose questioning the benefits of teaching a teacher education course at the laboratory school. In pursuance of providing some insight into the issue, we embarked on a research project to investigate what impact the course being taught at the laboratory school was having on the laboratory school children in grades K-5, the laboratory schoolteachers of these grades, and the university students who were enrolled in the course. The course was Elementary Curriculum, taken mid-program in the teacher education sequence at the university. The course focused on student learning, teaching methodologies, and curriculum development for elementary grades K-6.

The course was designed to have the university students teach a lesson to laboratory school children focused on authors of children's books. We wanted to highlight nonfiction books so that children and university students might see the benefits of using nonfiction trade books integrated within the curriculum. University students partnered to teach the author lessons to individual classrooms of laboratory children from grades K-5. The lessons were taught in the university classroom located within the laboratory school, and the children came to the classroom with their teacher during the regularly scheduled course times.

Additionally, another essential component of the course was a series of presentations given to the university students from some of the practicing laboratory schoolteachers and other school professionals, such as the school nurse and the counselor. Each guest speaker presented in

his or her area of expertise, with topics including constructivism, integrated curriculum, gifted and talented education, infusing technology, diversity, disabilities, and classroom management. These topics were chosen to complement the content of the course.

Procedures

Survey Design

The tools for data collection consisted of surveys. Each of the three groups, the guest speakers, the laboratory school children, and the university students, completed a separate survey. The laboratory children were further divided into two groups: primary, grades K-2; and intermediate, grades 3-5. The surveys for the laboratory school children were sent home along with consent forms for parents to sign if they wished to participate in the study. The surveys and consent forms for the laboratory schoolteachers (guest speakers) were given to them at school, and the surveys for the university students were posted on a website for them to complete and return to a person not involved with the research, who removed the names of the students and then sent the completed surveys to us, i.e., the authors of this study. The method insured confidentiality, which was essential because, Lynne, the second author of the study was also the instructor for the course.

The surveys for the primary grades consisted of a simple format of faces representing a yes, a smiley face; and no, a frowning face in answering three yes or no questions (see Appendix A). The intent of these questions was to determine if the child viewed the experience of participating in the author lesson as a positive or negative experience. We attempted to devise the survey so that a primary grade student could complete them independently or with minimal assistance from a care-giving adult at home.

The survey for the intermediate children consisted of two questions (see Appendix B). The intent of these questions was to determine what the children's reactions were to coming to a university classroom in their school to participate in an author lesson, and if they thought the author lessons were beneficial to their learning. We designed this survey to be completed independently by the intermediate students with minimal assistance.

The survey for the university students consisted of three questions (see Appendix C). The first question invited the students to make a judgment about having a university class at a laboratory school as opposed to a university classroom or lecture hall. The second question was aimed at discovering student reactions when considering and planning for a lesson with real children versus peer teaching. The third question asked students to share the thinking they did while planning and preparing to teach in a classroom.

The survey for the laboratory schoolteachers consisted of two questions (see Appendix D). The first question invited teachers to share personal reflections about the impact their presentations had on the university students. The second question asked the teachers to share personal reactions to having a university course being taught in their school.

Data Collection

At the conclusion of the course, consent forms and surveys for the laboratory school children that participated in the author studies were sent home with the students. If parents approved and wanted their children to participate, they signed the consents and the children completed the surveys. These were returned to the classroom teacher, and we collected them. There were 112 students that had participated in the lessons and 31 returned surveys. We attribute the surveys that were returned to those classroom teachers who continued to remind students, along with mentioning the surveys in classroom newsletters sent home to families. For the sake of future studies to receive a higher rate of return, we would advise the practice of encouraging classroom teachers to help in the return process.

Consents and surveys were given to the laboratory schoolteachers who participated as guest speakers, and if they wanted to participate, they signed the consents and completed the surveys. There were 12 participants in this group and 11 returned surveys. We attribute this high rate of return to Lynne's school-based location, which allowed her to have daily contact with the laboratory schoolteachers.

The university students were E-mailed a letter of invitation to participate in the study. If they wanted to participate, they were directed to click on a link that would take them to a secure website where they could complete and submit the survey electronically. The electronic submissions were sent to someone other than the researchers who removed the actual student names from the surveys and assigned them a code name. The completed surveys were then sent to the researchers. This process insured participant confidentiality. Consent was implied if the student completed the survey and submitted it electronically (see Heflich & Rice, 1999). All 98 students enrolled in the course were invited to participate, and 32 returned surveys. The authors attribute this low rate of return to lack of student interest. To insure confidentiality, student names were removed before we viewed the surveys. The students knew that their instructor would not know who sent in a survey and who did not. It is most likely that students did not believe that there was anything for them to gain from doing the surveys, such as a grade or bonus points; and, given their busy schedules, they chose to skip something that they thought would not directly benefit them. In regards to future research of this type, the instructor could encourage a higher rate of return by setting an overall, class goal of returned surveys to attain, and if reached, give students some type of reward, while still retaining individual confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The returned surveys were divided into three groups, the laboratory school children, the university students, and the laboratory schoolteachers who presented during the university class. The surveys from the intermediate children and the laboratory schoolteachers were typed and coded with participant identification (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). It was not necessary to type the university student surveys since the students had completed them on a computer and they could be printed. Within each group of surveys, each question was read and analyzed separately. After we read a question silently together, we discussed what we thought were the units of meaning within the participant's answer and recorded them on paper (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once all the units were recorded for each question, the units were read to determine a category that could stand for the summary meaning within the units for a particular question (see Appendix E for an example). Each question was analyzed one at a time this with this procedure

through all the surveys. We thought this kept our attention focused only on a particular question, so we were better able to identify patterns of meaning within participant answers. Being able to discuss our thoughts and interpretations helped us to clarify any ambiguity, which, we think, kept us on a consistent track through the data analysis process.

Once the categories for each question were determined, tables were developed in order to view the units of meaning, the categories, and the questions all at once (Hubbard & Power, 1993). After studying the tables, the categories were further refined into the outcomes of the study framed by the study questions (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In order to insure a more accurate interpretation of the outcomes, we decided to study the tables alone, without discussion, and record what we thought were the outcomes. During our follow up meeting, we shared what we had written for the outcomes of the study based on the data analysis we had completed and were amazed at how similar our findings were.

Results and Discussion

University Students

Outcome 1: The university students learned more about real children and how to teach them.

The first question on the survey was, "What are your thoughts about having a teacher education class in a university laboratory school setting versus having class held in a university lecture hall or classroom?" The outcome that emerged from the data analysis suggested that *the university students learned more about real children and how to teach them.* Patterns in student answers indicated that they appreciated the exposure and experience from interacting with school children (McDuffie, Ackerson, & Morrison, 2003). They enjoyed teaching "real" students from different grade levels versus peer teaching which is the usual practice in a university classroom. One university student made the comment, "Working with actual students makes the experience more relevant and hands-on." They thought that they were able to apply what they had learned from their university courses to actual teaching situations or to making connections between theory and practice. One student wrote, "When class is held at the Lab school, it feels like we are part of the 'real world.' We feel a connection to the children we could be teaching someday. When we have a class at the university, the learning is abstract." Another student commented, "Working with the children from the lab school gives us an authentic experience of how to apply the knowledge we learn in our classes." Of the 32 university students who returned their surveys, only two stated anything negative about having their university class meeting at the laboratory school, and the main problem was having enough time to get to the laboratory school and back to their next class (even though the laboratory school was only about a block away from the main campus). But, overall, most students thought the inconvenience was worth it. As one student stated, "It is somewhat inconvenient having to go all the way to the lab school and only have ten minutes to get back to my next class at SEC [the education building on campus], but overall, I think it benefits the education students."

Another pattern that emerged from the data analysis was that the university students thought they learned about teaching and children from the laboratory schoolteachers that came into the classroom and presented information about teaching (Burant & Kirby, 2002). A student commented, "I also learned many things from the teachers at the lab school that came to our class as guest speakers. We learned about many different things, from diversity in the classroom,

to incorporating technology, to meeting the needs of gifted and talented students." Students also mentioned that the guest speakers gave them the opportunity to make professional contacts that they could use in the future.

Some students noted that just being in an authentic school environment was beneficial for them. "I think it is nice just to be close to the children at the lab school, to hear their voices and see their work up in the hallways. We can benefit from seeing the various materials that are posted around the school. We can observe different curriculum ideas and parent communications."

Outcome 2: The university students were excited about the opportunity to teach to real students and that the experience would prepare them for their own classrooms someday.

The second question on the survey was, **"**What reaction did you have when you realized you would be presenting a lesson to a university laboratory school class of children?" The outcome for this question was that *the university students were excited about the opportunity to teach to real students and that the experience would prepare them for their own classrooms someday,* with all the respondents indicating that they thought this was a positive experience for them (Maxie, 2001). Although most of the respondents thought the experience was positive, 35% of the students expressed feelings of anxiety or nervousness. Students expressed concerns about being observed by fellow classmates during their lesson and being unsure about how the children would respond to them. One student's response summarizes the feelings expressed, "I was nervous that our class was going to be the audience to the whole lesson. That made me nervous because we didn't know the children, and you just never know what children are going to say or do that you will have to react to." Students indicated that they thought the experience would better prepare them for their own classroom someday. One student wrote, "The absolute best way to prepare ourselves for this career is to have experiences as close to those that we will encounter in the future." In addition to preparing content to teach to children, the university students also needed to consider classroom management principles as this student emphasizes by saying, "Being with real children is the best way to learn. Not only did we have to teach content, but we had to use management principles as well." Another student points out in his response that he learned something about dealing with students who are off-task during a teacher's lesson along with how to respond to questions that children ask. "Teaching my lesson to the elementary students allowed me the opportunity to deal with inattentive students and questions that only are asked by children." Most respondents made comments that they value as many authentic teaching experiences as possible in their teacher education program (Schwartz & Fischer, 2003). One student said, "I believe that actually teaching is the best way to learn about teaching."

Outcome 3: The university students developed lessons that they thought would be the most beneficial for the children they were teaching.

The third question on the survey was**, "**What specific considerations did you make when preparing to teach author lessons to university laboratory school children?" Data analysis revealed that *the university students developed lessons that they thought would be the most beneficial for the children they were teaching.* Due to completing field experiences required from other university classes at the laboratory school, many of the university students had some prior knowledge about the children to whom they would be presenting a lesson. One student

responded, "I knew the students that I was going to be teaching; I had completed my level 2 field experience in this grade. Therefore, when preparing for this lesson, I factored in the things I knew about these students. For example, due to the specific characteristics of this class, it was extremely vital to engage students and get them interested in the lesson." Many students commented that they considered the age of the children they would be teaching and made decisions based upon age-appropriateness (McCombs, 2001). One student wrote, "We considered the age of the students and thought about activities that would make for an enjoyable lesson and learning experience." Getting and maintaining the attention of the lab school children they were teaching was a main consideration that impacted what the university students planned. A student commented, "I made sure that the students' focus would be on my presentation by incorporating as much information about my author that would grab their attention. I used interesting facts along with bright colors in my display and planned a fun evaluation." Another student stated, "I wanted the children to be excited about what they were learning, so I had to make sure that I was excited about it also." The majority of respondents, 72%, said they thought about children's prior knowledge, attention span, common interests, reading levels, and learning styles as they developed their lessons.

Laboratory Schoolteachers

Outcome 1: The teachers thought their presentations impacted university students' learning about the practice of teaching from teachers who were currently teaching children.

The first question on the schoolteachers' survey was, **"**What impact do you think your presentation had on the Elementary Curriculum students?" The data analysis suggested that *the teachers thought their presentations impacted university students' learning about the practice of teaching from teachers who were currently teaching children*. The teachers thought that they were able to offer, "tips from practicing teachers that would help students in their future career." One teacher wrote in her response, "I believe it [the presentation] offered practical tips and resources to help them to be successful in classroom management as a new teacher." Another teacher commented, "Practicing educators are invaluable resources at the pre-service level." Most of the teachers thought their presentations offered practical ideas for ways to relate what the university students were learning in their classes to the real practice of teaching (DeWeese, 2003). A teacher made this statement, "I think I was able to share with the students how to use a variety of graphic organizers by sharing real examples of children's work." Another teacher's response indicated that she hoped the university students learned something about how to build a "community of learners" within a classroom: "I hope they feel that they have some practical ideas of how to get their students involved in creating classroom rules and taking ownership in the classroom community." One teacher that responded was new to the profession and thought that her presentation offered hope to the university students that someday they will find a career position. "Being a new teacher, I feel the university students could relate to my thoughts. I feel that I provided them with hope and confidence about finding a job and ways to go about it."

The schoolteachers' second question was**, "**What impact did having the Elementary Curriculum course at the laboratory school have on you?" Saying *they thought their students benefited from the author lessons that the university students taught, and that they appreciated the opportunity to share information about their own teaching with the university students* can best summarize the outcome of the teachers' responses to question 2. One teacher commented

about the variety of teaching styles. "The exposure to a variety of teaching styles benefited my students, and the author lessons were excellent experiences for all." The belief that students benefited from the author lessons is best described by the comments such as, "It gave me a sense that my students were getting an added class in literature" and "It gave my students information about multicultural education and literature."

We noticed that when we analyzed the responses to the second question, aimed at prompting the teachers to share personal reflections on their experiences with the laboratory course, most teachers responded in reference to how their students, i.e., were impacted. However, a few of the teachers did share how they personally were impacted. One teacher mentioned being impacted by the type of questions university students asked during her presentation: "They [university students] often times will ask 'deep thought' kinds of questions that require me to really think about the philosophical part of my knowledge." Another teacher responded by saying she enjoyed sharing her knowledge. "I enjoyed being able to present to the Elementary Curriculum class. I liked being able to share what I know and what I'm doing in my teaching." Two teachers hinted that presenting and taking their students to the university class in their building was an inconvenience. One teacher said, "I needed to be flexible to allow my elementary students to attend the Elementary Curriculum class." And the second teacher said, "My schedule was impacted when visiting and presenting at the Elementary Curriculum classroom." From these responses, we assumed that they might have thought that going to the class interrupted their already busy schedules and possibly thought of it as "one more thing to do."

Laboratory School Children

Intermediate Students

There were 8 intermediate students who returned surveys. There were 2 questions that invited a response from the students, but each student did not always answer both questions, hence the number of responses for each question does not always match the number of respondents.

Outcome 1:The laboratory students were curious to learn about authors.

The first question on the intermediate students' survey was, **"**What was your reaction to coming into the university class for an author lesson?" The data analysis indicated that *the laboratory students were curious to learn about authors*. One student said, "I liked finding out about a real author, I loved asking questions, and I liked finding out what they [authors] do in their spare time." The responses to the survey questions by the intermediate students were usually very brief, short sentences or phrases. One student wrote, "I wanted to know about them [the authors]. Another student commented," I was excited about coming to the lesson." Two students responded that they were not impressed with the author lessons. The first student said, "I personally think it was kind of boring, but it was still okay." And the second student said, "It was okay, I didn't hate it, but I didn't like it."

Outcome 2: The laboratory school students thought they learned about authors and what books they wrote.

The second question on the survey was, **"**What impact did the author lessons have on your learning?" The data analysis showed *that the laboratory school students thought they learned about authors and what books they wrote* (see Kiefer, 2001). The responses to this question were too brief to determine a deeper outcome. One student wrote, "I don't think I did not learn anything. I learned that Seymor Simon [Seymour Simon] wrote those books." Another student commented, "It helped me. Helped me learn authors." The most significant answer, we thought, was what one student wrote, "I now pay attention to who the author is in a book. I now know what I want to be when I grow up is a fact book author." This student appears to have made a personal connection to the author and to see herself as being an author someday.

Primary Students

The data analysis derived from the responses from the primary students are presented and discussed in this section. As mentioned earlier in the article, the survey questions to which they responded had simply a smiley face to represent a yes answer and a frowning face to represent a no answer.

Outcome: The students thought it was a positive experience, they learned something about authors, and that they would like to continue coming to the university classroom for lessons about authors.

The first question was, "Did you like coming to the UNI classroom to learn about different authors?" There were seventeen students that responded, and sixteen responded by circling the smiley face indicating that they liked it. One student circled the frowning face indicating that he or she did not like it.

The second question was, "Did you learn something about authors that you didn't know before?" There were eighteen students that responded by circling the smiley face indicating they thought they had learned something new about authors, and 4 students circled the frowning face indicating they did not think that they had learned anything new.

The third question was, "Would you like to keep coming to learn about authors?" Eleven students responded to this question by circling the smiley face indicating that they would like to keep coming, and 7 students responded by circling the frowning face indicating that they did not want to keep coming. It is important to note, that of the twenty-three students that returned the surveys, not all of the three questions were always answered, and sometimes, both the smiley face and the frowning face were circled. We realistically could only consider those responses that a student clearly made. The data analysis indicated that *the* [majority of] *students thought it was a positive experience, they learned something about authors, and that they would like to continue coming to the university classroom for lessons about authors* (see Madura, 1995).

Implications

From the results of the study, we can draw several implications. First, student teachers can benefit from the hands-on teaching experiences offered by a laboratory school. The student teachers in the study mentioned that they thought the lessons they did were meaningful to them because they were for real children versus peer teaching within their classrooms. The students developed their lessons as they thought about their prior knowledge of children. The students were also conscious of the responsibility of managing the groups of children they were teaching.

Second, student teachers and practicing teachers can learn from each other in a laboratory school setting. Sometimes it is difficult to have practicing teachers come to university classrooms to deliver presentations. In a laboratory school, however, the student teachers and practicing teachers are both present in the same setting. The practicing teachers provide a rich resource that the student teachers can access, and the student teachers provide motivation and validity for the lab schoolteachers to disseminate and pursue knowledge.

Third, because the laboratory schoolteachers were also university faculty, they were particularly focused on preservice teacher education. They were accustomed to teaching preservice teachers and welcomed the opportunity to do presentations with them. From their presentations, the faculty were also able to grow and reflect upon their role with the university and how they might further their own professional advancement.

Fourth, laboratory school children can benefit from exposure to student teachers through learning new content and experiencing different teaching styles. Although the majority of the children indicated they thought the student teachers' lessons were a positive experience, it remains to be seen how the children perceive the student teachers. This issue could be the direction for future research.

Since we conducted this study, twelve more preservice teacher education classes have been implemented in the laboratory school. The classes include classroom management, children's literature, expressive arts, speech and language, and music. Following this study, there has also been an increase in the number of collaborative research projects between laboratory school-based faculty and university-based faculty examining a wide range of educational issues. The laboratory school described in this study continues to be a vital component in our preservice teacher education.

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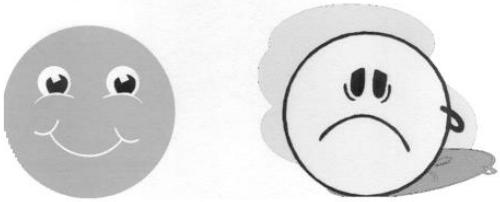
Appendix A. Survey for Primary Grade Students

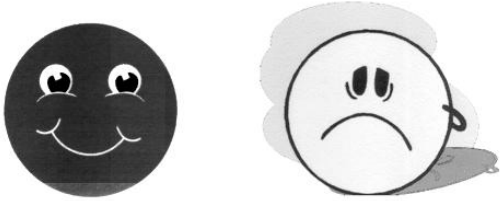
SURVEY FOR PRIMARY GRADE STUDENTS AT PLS

1. Did you like coming into the UNI classroom to learn about different authors?

2. Did you learn something about authors that you didn't know before?



3. Would you like to keep coming to learn about authors?



Appendix B. Survey for Intermediate Students

SURVEY FOR INTERMEDIATE STUDENTS

1. What was your reaction to coming into the university class for an author lesson?

2. What impact did the author lessons have on your learning?

Appendix C. Survey for University Students

SURVEY FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

1. What are your thoughts about having a teacher education class in a university laboratory school setting versus having class held in a university lecture hall or classroom?

2. What reaction did you have when you realized you would be presenting a lesson to a

university laboratory school class of children?

3. What specific considerations did you make when preparing to teach author lessons to university laboratory school children?

Appendix D. Survey for Faculty

SURVEY FOR FACULTY

1. What impact do you think your presentation had on the Elementary Curriculum students?

2. What impact did having the Elementary Curriculum course at the laboratory school have on you?

Appendix E. Unitized Survey Results From PLS Faculty

Question #1: What impact do you think your presentation had on the Elementary Curriculum Students?	**Question #2:** What impact did having the Elementary Curriculum course at PLS have on you?
Units: real school, real teachers, tips from practicing teachers, how to build a community in their classrooms, classroom rules, practical ideas **Category**: Authentic setting	**Units:** better way to learn, here is where the action is **Category**: Authentic setting
Units: provides hope and confidence about finding a job, invaluable resources **Category:** Positive role model	**Units:** personal thoughts based on questions asked, talking with classes made me think **Category**: Personal reflection
Units: graphic organizers, examples of real student work, using technology to enhance curriculum **Category**: How teaching strategies are applied	**Units**: quick access **Category**: Accessibility
Units: give them the desire to learn more about children **Category**: Motivating UNI students to learn more	Units: talking with other classes, share what I know Category: Opportunity to present
Units: multicultural education and literature **Category**: New information	**Units**: needing to be flexible in personal schedule Category: Flexibility
	Units: added class in literature, enhance awareness, exposure to other curriculum material, different authors **Category**: Supports Curriculum